The field of urban park management continued to rapidly evolve this year, as urban park professionals grappled with the ongoing effects of the pandemic and shifting local and national political landscapes. Despite these challenges, parks organizations remained steadfastly focused on the critical role parks play. Parks are key to our future, from ensuring cities remain vibrant and vital to addressing the profound challenges of climate change and bolstering the physical and mental wellbeing of our communities. Every person deserves access to adequately funded and well-cared for parks, a founding principle that guides the Institute for Urban Parks.

Since its earliest days, the Central Park Conservancy has provided critical assistance and support to parks throughout New York City and North America. In 2013, we formalized that work when we created the Institute. The Institute’s central mission is to ensure urban park organizations have the knowledge and tools to develop and maintain great public spaces. With over 40 years of experience managing a world-famous park, we are uniquely positioned to share this expertise, and we take that responsibility—to our peers and park users everywhere—seriously.

Our flagship Five Borough Program, a joint effort between the Conservancy and NYC Parks, provides on-site technical assistance, direct landscape maintenance and restoration support, and field-based training to NYC Parks staff and their supporting community partners.

The Institute’s Partnerships Lab, an eight-month organizational mentorship, works with partners across the City and country on a specific strategic development issue, allowing them to enhance their capacity to serve their communities.

The Institute also offers a series of continuing education programs, in partnership with the City University of New York, that instill park professionals with critical core concepts and best practices. These programs make clear that urban park managers practice a highly valued, unique profession that requires ongoing education and supports the evolution of exceptional park care.

We lead roundtables and conferences; partner on pressing City-wide initiatives, like the Green Relief and Recovery Fund; and provide free consultation to dozens of groups outside of our formal programming. We will continue to do so as long as there is a need because it is incumbent on the Central Park Conservancy to be there for every park and park organization.

To date, the Institute has advised nearly 1,000 parks and park organization projects globally. This has allowed the Conservancy to build a deep network of leaders and urban park managers across North America, including more than 300 NYC Parks staff trained through Institute-managed programs.

The Institute’s growth and impact would not have been possible without the steadfast support of our President and CEO, Betsy Smith, the Institute Advisory Board, and our generous supporters, for whom I am deeply grateful. As you read through the highlights in this report, I hope you will sense the tremendous energy and optimism fueling the Institute’s work as we enter the year ahead.

Maura Lout
Executive Director, Institute for Urban Parks
OUR IMPACT

Since 2013, the Institute has provided support, connection, and engagement in the following ways:

15,100+ HOURS OF SUPPORT AND 70+ IMPROVEMENT PROJECTS IN 24 NYC PARKS THROUGH THE FIVE BOROUGH PROGRAM

| 3,850+ HOURS OF PRO BONO ADVISEMENT PROVIDED TO 900+ PARK ORGANIZATIONS GLOBALLY ACROSS ALL PROGRAMS |
| 715+ CONSULTATIONS PROVIDED TO PARK ORGANIZATIONS UPON REQUEST |
| 430+ PARK MANAGERS ACROSS NORTH AMERICA TRAINED AND PROFESSIONALLY DEVELOPED |
| 320+ HOURS OF PRO BONO FACILITATION TO NYC PARKS THROUGH THE NYC GREEN RELIEF & RECOVERY FUND |
| 320+ NYC PARKS STAFF ENGAGED IN TRAINING PROGRAMS |
| 120 CENTRAL PARK CONSERVANCY STAFF CONSULTED BY PEER ORGANIZATIONS FOR SUBJECT MATTER EXPERTISE |
| 9 URBAN PARK ROUNDTABLES HOSTED IN CITIES ACROSS THE COUNTRY |
| 5 COHORTS OF THE URBAN PARK LEADERSHIP PROGRAM |
| 5 COHORTS OF THE URBAN PARK MANAGEMENT CERTIFICATE |

This year, the Institute expanded its portfolio of projects to provide resources and increase support to parks and public spaces across NYC. Simultaneously, the Institute dedicated more pro bono hours of consultation, training, and peer-to-peer facilitation to parks organizations at home and around the world than ever before. We look forward to continuing to increase our impact in NYC and beyond as we rise to meet the needs of our ever-changing landscape.

Grey Elam, Director of NYC Programs, working with Conservancy Operations staff as part of the Five Borough Program.
2021 PROGRAM HIGHLIGHTS

Thought Leadership & Peer-to-Peer Exchange

- The Institute supported the NYC Green Relief & Recovery Fund by advising its grant distribution and providing critical research to shape funding strategies. Our Green Fund Literature Review, which documents the critical role parks and open spaces play in New York City’s economic and environmental sustainability, informed the Fund’s RFP. The Institute continues to support the NYC Green Fund recipients as an active member of the NYC Parks Economic Benefits Study and the City Parks Foundation Advisory Council.
- In collaboration with the Yale University School of the Environment and the Natural Areas Conservancy, the Conservancy launched the Urban Parks Climate Resiliency project, which the Institute is supporting.
- In August, the City Parks Alliance, the leading national advocacy organization for urban parks, appointed Executive Director Maura Lout to its Board. Additionally, Maura shared insight on public-private partnerships as a featured speaker at the 2021 AIANY Civic Leadership Program and regularly lectures on public-private partnerships at Columbia University.
- The Institute continued to serve as the lead facilitator for the NYC “New Parks Era” working group. In addition, the Institute launched diversity, equity, and inclusion assessments for several NYC park organizations and will facilitate the development of the related action plans.

URBAN PARK ROUNDTABLES

The Urban Park Roundtables, held seasonally, convene park professionals from around the country to collectively develop “next practices” in urban park management.

- This year, 152 participants from 148 organizations in 60 cities and six countries registered for this year’s Roundtable events.
- The spring 2021 Roundtable, held virtually, focused on the evolution of park organizations’ responses to the pandemic. Topics included adapting broader organizational goals, such as fundraising, programming, strategic investments, infrastructure, and operations, to meet the needs of the time.
- The Institute expanded its offerings to include a summer Roundtable based on the overwhelmingly enthusiastic reaction to the spring Roundtable. This year’s summer session focused on the use of technology in urban parks.
- At the fall 2021 Roundtable, the Institute returned to in-person programming, traveling to Chicago, Illinois, for a session focused on cultivating successful collaborations.

“The Partnership Lab provided constant support and input as we developed the framework for our organization, built the metrics by which we can measure our successes, finessed our mission, and built a stronger and more committed Board of Directors.”

—Frank Rowe, Executive Director, Denver Park Trust

Fall 2021 Urban Park Roundtable participants on a tour of the Bloomingdale Trail in Chicago, IL.
“Participating in the Partnerships Lab has been a tremendously rewarding experience. Collaborating with Institute staff and subject matter experts is invaluable, and being part of a community of other organizations grappling with diverse but overlapping challenges has helped us narrow and define our own priorities. With the Institute’s guidance and support, we’ve set exciting aspirational goals, and laid the foundation to make them attainable in the long-term.”

—Merritt Birnbaum, Executive Director, The Friends of Governors Island

Capacity Building

THE PARTNERSHIPS LAB

The Partnerships Lab is an application-based, eight-month mentorship for organizations and agencies that care for parks and public spaces in New York City and across the country. In its second year, the Institute’s Partnerships Lab portfolio included eight organizations from five cities across the United States. Nearly 70 park professionals were engaged in the work of the Lab.

The NYC cohort included the Friends of Mosholu Parkland (Bronx), Hudson River Park Friends (Manhattan), Marine Park Alliance (Brooklyn), and The Friends of Governors Island (Manhattan). The national cohort included the Centennial Park Conservancy (Nashville, TN), Denver Park Trust (Denver, CO), Downtown Detroit Partnership (Detroit, MI), and NeighborSpace (Chicago, IL). In addition to biweekly meetings with designated team members, all eight groups met monthly to share ideas, discuss common challenges, and hear from subject matter experts.

Partnerships Lab biweekly meeting with NYC cohort member, The Friends of Governors Island.

Denver Park Trust, a Partnerships Lab national cohort member, participates in a full-day board retreat.
Continuing Education

URBAN PARK MANAGEMENT CERTIFICATE

The online Urban Park Management Certificate provides a non-credit credential for professionals in the field and focuses on practices critical to the care and management of urban parks. The certificate program remains incredibly popular, with approximately 20 practitioners in each cohort and both spring 2021 and fall 2021 cohorts at capacity.

Participants in this year’s cohorts represented park agencies and organizations across the United States, including Atlanta, GA; Austin, TX; Boston, MA; Charlotte, NC; Cleveland, OH; Detroit, MI; Houston, TX; Lafayette, LA; Morristown, NJ; Norfolk, VA; Oak Park, IL; Oklahoma City, OK; Philadelphia, PA; Raleigh, NC; San Francisco, CA; Sarasota, FL; Stockton, CA; Stratford, CT; Westbury, NY; and New York City, NY. The cohorts also included four international locations: Canada (Edmonton, Alberta, and Toronto, Ontario), El Salvador (Santa Tecla), and Mexico (San Pedro Garza García, N.L.).

URBAN PARK LEADERSHIP PROGRAM

The Urban Park Leadership Program brings together senior-level urban park professionals from around the world for a nine-month experience of learning, network-weaving, and collaborative problem solving.

This year’s cohort included Conservancy staff and participants from Austin, TX; Chicago, IL; Cincinnati, OH; Darien, CT; Hartsdale, NY; Houston, TX; Jeffersonville, IN; New York City, NY; Mexico City, Mexico; Raleigh, NC; and St. Paul, MN.

Institute Milestones

NEW FUNDERS
Bank of America Charitable Foundation

NEW INSTITUTE TEAM MEMBERS
• Michael Gonzales, Director of Program Administration
• Sophie Neuhaus, Coordinator of National Programs

NEW AND UPDATED PROGRAM HIGHLIGHTS
• Deeper involvement in systems change work in NYC via the Parks and Open Space Partners (POSP) and the New Parks Era working group
• Expanded continuing education programs to meet increased demand
• Return to in-person programs: Urban Park Roundtable and Partnerships Lab

• Increased staff participation in Institute programming, including continuing education programs and Urban Park Roundtables

NEW PARTNERSHIPS
• Executive Director Maura Lout was appointed to the Board of the City Parks Alliance
HELPING OTHER PARKS

UNITED STATES
 Alabama: Birmingham, Decatur, Montgomery
 Arizona: Goodyear, Phoenix, Tucson
 Arkansas: Little Rock
 California: Carmichael, Irvine, Long Beach, Los Angeles, Pasadena, San Diego, San Francisco, San Jose, Stockton
 Colorado: Denver
 Connecticut: Hartford, Stanford, West Hartford
 Florida: Fort Pierce, Jacksonville, Lakeland, Miami, Sarasota
 Georgia: Atlanta
 Hawaii: Honolulu
 Illinois: Chicago, Oak Park
 Indiana: Indianapolis, Jefferson
 Iowa: Des Moines
 Kentucky: Covington, Louisville
 Louisiana: Lafayette, New Orleans
 Maryland: Baltimore, Bethesda, College Park
 Massachusetts: Boston, Brookline, Cambridge, Nantucket
 Michigan: Detroit, Ferndale, Grand Rapids, Lansing
 Minnesota: Minneapolis, St. Paul
 Missouri: St. Louis
 New Jersey: Jersey City, Maplewood, Morristown, Newark
 New Mexico: Las Cruces
 New York: Buffalo, New York City, Westbury, Westchester
 North Carolina: Charlotte, Greensboro, Raleigh
 Ohio: Cleveland, Cincinnati, Columbus
 Oklahoma: Oklahoma City, Tulsa
 Oregon: Portland
 Pennsylvania: Philadelphia, Pittsburgh
 Rhode Island: Providence, Warwick
 South Carolina: Charleston
 Tennessee: Memphis, Nashville
 Texas: Austin, Dallas, Houston, San Antonio
 Virginia: Ashburn, Charlottesville, Leesburg, Norfolk, Richmond, Virginia Beach
 Washington: Seattle
 Washington, D.C.
 Wisconsin: Milwaukee

MEXICO
 Guanajuato: Guanajuato, León
 Mexico City: Mexico City
 Nuevo León: Monterrey, San Pedro Garza García
 Veracruz: Veracruz

INTERNATIONAL
 Brazil: São Paulo
 Chile: Santiago
 Denmark: Copenhagen
 El Salvador: Santa Tecla
 Netherlands: Rotterdam
 Trinidad & Tobago: Port of Spain

URBAN CITIES ACROSS NORTH AMERICA

INSTITUTE FOR URBAN PARKS IMPACT REPORT 2021
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SUPPORTERS


INSTITUTE STAFF

• Maura Lout, Executive Director
• Michael Gonzales, Director of Program Administration
• Grey Elam, Director of New York City Programs
• Sarah Tracy, Director of National Programs
• Sophie Neuhaus, Coordinator of National Programs